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ABSTRACT

Increasing numbers of women are returning to college following an interruption of their education. Role strain is a common experience of these women. Most studies of role strain and family support among returning women have relied on the women's self-reports. A study was conducted using manipulated descriptions of family environments which were evaluated by 86 husbands of returning students. The results revealed that participants indicated greater support for the wife's education when she continued to meet all or part of her family's needs than when she neglected them. Further, husbands believed the woman who fit the "Super-Mom" stereotype was more likely to obtain an advanced degree. The husband was perceived to experience greater stress when his wife neglected her household responsibilities and when she reneged on her commitment to spend time with him. Participants also perceived the wife who neglected her family to be under more stress, possibly because they believed she should feel guilty. The results imply that a returning woman earns support for her education by continuing to meet her family's and husband's needs. (Author/ABL)

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Perceived Spousal Support For Women Who Return to College

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Abstract

Most studies of role strain and family support among returning women have relied on their self-reports. Instead, this study used manipulated descriptions of family environments which were evaluated by 86 participants who were husbands of returning students. As expected, participants indicated greater support for the wife's education when she continued to meet all or part of her family's needs than when she neglected them. Further, participants believed the woman who fit the "Super-Mom" stereotype was more likely to obtain an advanced degree. The husband was perceived to experience greater stress when his wife neglected her household responsibilities and when she reneged on her commitment to spend time with him. Interestingly, participants also perceived the wife who neglected her family to be under more stress, possibly because they believed she should feel guilty. The results imply that a returning woman "earns" support for her education by continuing to meet her family's and husband's needs.

Perceived Spousal Support For Women Who Return To College

Increasing numbers of women are returning to college following an interruption of their education. Returning women themselves have stressed how important it is for their husbands to approve of and encourage them in this endeavor (e.g., Berkove, 1979). But, in a study using interviews with husbands and wives (Ballmer & Cozby, 1981), returning families reported more conflict and less cohesiveness in the family unit than did nonreturning families. Similarly, Holahan and Gilbert (1979) examined conflict in dual career couples with children and found that the wife's role conflict was associated with lack of spousal support, negative feelings from husband about her degree of career commitment, and longer working hours, among other factors.

Role strain is a common experience of women who return to college (Badenhoop & Hohansen, 1980; Berkove, 1979; Van Meter & Agronow, 1982). When there are children, for example, the returning woman feels that she is expected to meet her family obligations as before in order to maintain endorsement of her education. These feelings may be justified because even married men attending college want their ideal partners to be primarily interested in home and family (Hipple, 1976). Lack of spousal

support and role strain may stifle the achievement needs of many homemakers (cf. Erdwins, 1980; Van Meter & Agronow, 1982).

This study addressed the issues of spousal support and role strain by manipulating in descriptions the two areas of greatest concern to a husband when his wife returns to college--the amount of time she has to fulfill her household obligations and children's needs (cf. Van Meter & Agronow, 1982) and the amount of time she can spend with him (cf. Berkove, 1979). The study further departed from past research by using husbands of returning women students as participants.

Main effects of family role behavior and time commitment to spouse were predicted. We hypothesized that the participants would be more supportive of the compensating and overcompensating wife because, as compared to the noncompensating wife, both are carrying extra burdens. But we expected no difference in support between the compensating and overcompensating wife because both are continuing to meet the family's and husband's needs. We also hypothesized that the participants generally would be more supportive of the wife who consistently committed time to her husband than of the wife who made an inconsistent time commitment.

Further, we predicted that an interaction between family role behavior and time commitment to spouse would occur. That is, we expected that the family role behavior manipulation would have no effect on ratings of spousal support in the inconsistent commitment

condition and that these ratings all would be generally low. By contrast, in the consistent time commitment condition, we expected lower ratings of spousal support to be made in the noncompensating versus the compensating and overcompensating conditions. These predictions were based on the assumption that our participants would be more sensitive to whether the wife committed time to her husband and, if that condition were met, they then would base their support judgments on how well she met her family's needs.

Method

Participants

The research participants were 86 husbands of married returning women students who had an average educational level of 15 years. Their wives were students at Fullerton College, California State University, Fullerton, and California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. The mean age for the wives was 41 years and the average number of children living at home was two. On the average, these women had been out of school 17 years, and they were carrying 10 course units; most were college juniors.

Design

The experiment was based on a 3 x 2 between-subjects design with manipulated descriptions of the family role behavior and time commitment to husband of a hypothetical returning woman student. Various measures of perceived support for the woman's education and

of family stress were included.

Procedure

Women students were selectively approached, based on their perceived age, in student-populated areas such as eating, studying, and parking areas, in major walkways, and in classrooms on the three campuses. It was explained to them that the study was about spousal support. The women were asked whether they were married, whether they had had a five-year break in their education, whether they were carrying at least six units of coursework, and whether they would request their husbands' participation in our study. Approximately every 6 out of 10 women approached met the criteria and agreed to take the stimulus materials. Of the 150 husbands contacted, 57% returned their questionnaires.

Instructions to participants. The husband participants were asked to complete demographic items on themselves and on their wives, to read the description and answer the questions, and to return the materials in a stamped envelope addressed to the experimenters.

Manipulations. All participants read that the returning wife had three children, was a full-time student and was interested in pursuing an advanced degree after graduation. Then one of three types of family role behavior by the wife was described: (1) noncompensating (placing greater emphasis on her school role and neglecting her household tasks and children), (2) compensating

(trying to balance her workloads by delegating some household tasks to her family), and (3) overcompensating (maintaining her previous level of commitment to the family's needs). Finally, the wife's degree of commitment to her husband was indicated. The wife in the consistent time commitment to husband condition set aside time for her husband each week, whereas the inconsistent time commitment wife planned such time but often changed her mind to fulfill her other obligations.

Dependent measures. Spousal support was measured on 7 point scales by the degree to which participants recommended that the wife reduce her college load, quit school and continue school. They were also asked to judge whether the husband should assume more responsibility at home and the likelihood the wife would earn an M.A. or a Ph.D. Other measures of family stress and fairness were taken, including manipulation checks that measured participants' perceptions of how considerate the wife was of her spouse's and family's needs and whether she spent enough time with her husband.

Debriefing. A brief explanation of the hypotheses and results was mailed to participants who requested the information.

Results

Manipulation Checks

Univariate analyses of variance were performed on the four manipulation checks. The effect of family role behavior was

significant for perceptions of family fairness, $F(2, 79) = 11.87$, $p < .001$, and for perceptions of the wife's consideration of her family, $F(2, 79) = 53.08$, $p < .001$. Orthogonal contrasts indicated that the noncompensating wife received significantly lower ratings than the compensating and overcompensating wives on both measures ($p < .05$). Further, as intended, greater family fairness was perceived in the compensating vs. overcompensating conditions ($p < .05$), and the overcompensating wife was rated as more considerate of her family than the compensating wife ($p < .05$).

The manipulation of time commitment to husband also was successful. Participants were more likely to agree that the wife was spending enough time with her husband in the consistent vs. inconsistent time commitment condition (Means = 4.41 vs. 3.48; $F(1, 79) = 7.69$, $p < .01$). The consistent commitment wife also was perceived as more considerate of her husband's needs ($M = 4.41$) than the inconsistent commitment wife ($M = 3.48$; $F(1, 79) = 6.84$, $p < .01$).

Dependent Variable Transformations

Prior to analysis, the remaining measures of spousal support and family stress were intercorrelated, transformed into z-scores, and then similar measures were combined and averaged to produce six conceptually distinct dependent variables: support for wife's education, perception of wife's stress level, perception of husband's stress level, likelihood of serious marital problems,

recommendation that the husband assume more home responsibilities, and likelihood that the wife would earn an advanced degree.

Multivariate Analyses

Because participants completed the materials at home and were asked to return them by mail, we expected that the cell sizes would be disproportionate (in fact, they ranged from 12 to 18), and that the ANOVA assumption of orthogonal independent variables would be violated. Therefore, a 2 x 3 between-subjects MANOVA was performed on the six dependent variables, and the main effects were assessed using hierarchical adjustments for nonorthogonality, as indicated in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

The assumptions of normality, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices, linearity and multicollinearity were met. Significant main effects of family role behavior and of time commitment to spouse on the set of dependent variables were found using Pillai's V criterion, irrespective of order of entry. The interaction was not significant. The family role behavior manipulation showed a strong association with the composite measure of the dependent variables (^{2} = .38), whereas the association was less substantial for the time commitment manipulation (^{2} = .19).

Univariate Analyses

Following the procedure advocated by Hummel and Sligo (1971), the univariate main effects on each dependent measure were examined. These analyses also are summarized in Table 1.

Family role behavior. Family role behavior had a significant univariate main effect on four dependent variables: support for wife's education, perception's of wife's stress level, perception's of husband's stress level, and likelihood that the wife would earn an advanced degree. No significant main effect occurred for likelihood of serious marital problems or for the recommendation that the husband assume more home responsibilities.

Comparisons among the means are in Table 2. As predicted,

Insert Table 2 about here

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participants indicated significantly greater support for the wife's education in the compensating and overcompensating vs. noncompensating family role conditions, $t(77) = 3.57$, $p < .01$. The stress levels of the wife and husband were perceived to be significantly higher in the non-compensating condition than in the compensating and overcompensating conditions ($t = 2.63$, $p < .01$ for wife's stress; $t = 3.21$, $p < .01$ for husband's stress). Participants also indicated that the overcompensating wife would be more likely to earn an advanced degree than would the compensating

and noncompensating wives, $t(77) = 2.43$, $p < .025$.

Time commitment to spouse. Significant main effects of time commitment to spouse were obtained for perceptions of husband's level of stress and for likelihood of serious marital problems, but not for the other measures. As shown in Table 3, participants perceived that the husband had a significantly higher stress level

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Insert Table 3 about here

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in the inconsistent vs. consistent time commitment conditions. Also, they rated the likelihood of serious marital problems to be significantly higher in the inconsistent commitment situation.

Discussion

It was predicted that support for the returning woman's education as a function of her family role behavior would be contingent on whether she committed time to her husband; however, no significant interactions were obtained. Instead, as predicted, family role behavior had a significant main effect on spousal support: subjects gave stronger support to the woman who continued to meet all or part of her family's needs than to the woman who neglected her family. Further, the overcompensating wife was perceived as more likely to earn an advanced degree as compared to her counterparts, suggesting the existence of a "Super-Mom" stereotype. The results are in line with findings by Berkove

(1979) that returning women feel they must maintain the same level of duty to family in order to receive emotional support from their husbands.

Significant family role behavior effects also occurred for perceptions of the husband's and wife's stress levels. As compared to the compensating and overcompensating conditions, the participants perceived that the husband of the noncompensating woman was experiencing more stress, possibly due to concern for the children's welfare. It is interesting that the noncompensating woman also was perceived as experiencing more stress than her counterparts, perhaps because participants believed she should feel guilty about neglecting her family. Clearly, a solution in the noncompensating situation might be to recommend that the husband assume more home responsibilities, but no differences in this recommendation occurred as a function of family role behavior. Although our results indicated a "helping trend" for the overcompensating wife, they are consistent with Berkove's findings that returning women perceive their husbands as less willing to help with household tasks.

Contrary to prediction, time commitment to husband had no effect on ratings of support for the wife's education. Possibly a primacy effect of family role behavior, which included references to the husband as part of the family, reduced the impact of the time commitment manipulation. Even so, if the wife committed time

to her husband and then did not follow through on her intention, the participants perceived the husband as significantly more stressed. Also, these inconsistent commitment participants perceived the marriage as more susceptible to serious problems than did the consistent commitment participants. This pattern supports Berkove's finding that returning women believe they must find special time for their husbands to reassure them that they will not be neglected. Apparently participants viewed a consistent time commitment to the husband as a more important index of marital "health" than the state of the household.

All together, the results suggest that a returning woman must "earn" support for her education by continuing to meet her family's and husband's needs. Even our relatively well-educated participants responded to the noncompensating woman by withdrawing support for her education rather than by recommending that the husband become more involved in the household. Even more unsettling, the "Super-Mom" was believed to be more likely to obtain an advanced degree but under no greater stress than the "Equity-Mom", despite the obvious health implications in maintaining such a lifestyle. Perhaps husbands do not perceive their wives' role strain as long as the home continues to function smoothly. By contrast, returning women have relatively accurate perceptions of their husbands' attitudes toward their education, as indicated by past research (e.g., Berkove, 1979; Van Meter &

Agronow, 1982).

Although our findings are intriguing, the participants are likely to have responded differently to our hypothetical descriptions than they do in their own family situations. Also, it is possible that only husbands with more positive and open-minded attitudes about their wives' education were motivated to respond and to return the materials. Even so, the attitudes of these respondents are much less equitable than might be expected. Future research might focus on the perspectives of spouses in returning families that differ in degree of equity in household tasks.

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Table 1

Summary of Multivariate and Univariate Analyses of Variance

Source	df	Multivariate Tests of Pillai's V F	(df)	Univariate Tests: Support for Wife's Education	Perception of Wife's Stress Level	Perception of Husband's Stress Level	Likelihood of Serious Marital Problems	Recommendation That Husband Assume More Home Responsibilities	Likelihood that Wife Will Earn Advanced Degree
A (Family Role Behavior)	2	3.18****	(12, 146)	7.58***	3.87**	8.02***	1.89	1.74	3.76*
A with effect of B removed		3.24****		7.58***	3.74*	7.99***	1.81	1.74	3.79*
B (Time Commitment to Spouse)	1	2.66**	(6, 72)	< 1	1.04	6.73**	5.27**	< 1	3.23
B with effect of A removed		2.74**		< 1	< 1	6.69**	5.09*	< 1	3.29
AxB interaction	2	1.60	(12, 146)	< 1	1.99	3.32*	< 1	< 1	< 1
				Univariate Error Mean Squares					
Residual (within cells) df = 77				.563	.703	.749	.947	1.02	.77

* p < .05 ** p < .025 *** p < .01 **** p < .001

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Table 2

Mean Comparisons for Family Role Behavior Manipulation

Z-Score Measure	Family Role Behavior		
	Noncompensating	Compensating	Overcompensating
1. Strength of support for wife's education (low-high)	-.47[a]	.09	.27
2. Perception of wife's stress level (low-high)	.37[a]	-.23	-.10
3. Perception of husband's stress level (low-high)	.49[a]	.09	-.40
4. Likelihood of serious marital problems (low-high)	.28	-.02	-.19
5. Strength of recommendation that husband assume more home responsibilities (low-high)	-.22	-.10	.26
6. Likelihood that wife will earn advanced degree (low-high)	-.30	-.11	.32[b]

a difference between noncompensating vs. compensating and overcompensating behaviors, $p < .01$

b difference between overcompensating vs. compensating and noncompensating behaviors, $p < .025$

Table 3

Mean Comparisons for Time Commitment to Husband Manipulation

Z-Score Measure	Time Commitment to Husband: Inconsistent Time Commitment	Time Commitment to Husband: Consistent Time Commitment	t(77)
1. Strength of support for wife's education (low-high)	-.04	-.03	ns
2. Perception of wife's stress level (low-high)	.08	-.06	ns
3. Perception of husband's stress level (low-high)	.26	-.17	2.24*
4. Likelihood of serious marital problems (low-high)	.28	-.23	2.36*
5. Strength of recommendation that husband assume more home responsibilities (low-high)	-.03	-.01	ns
6. Likelihood that wife will earn advanced degree (low-high)	-.22	.15	ns

* $p < .05$

** $p < .025$